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AUTHOR	Walvoord, Barbara E.; Carey, Anna K.; Smith, Hoke L.; Soled, Suzanne Wegener; Way, Philip K.; Zorn, Debbie
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ABSTRACT

Academic departments across the nation must reinvent new forms of collegiality and become more outward-oriented, more focused on results, and more entrepreneurial. They must develop new systems to reward their members, enhance productivity, and assure the quality of their work. Change strategies in the literature fall into six categories: (1) change the enrollment; (2) change the type of person in the department, (3) address values by building on them, changing them, or resolving conflicts among them; (4) change or build upon the way the department is structured in terms of its organization, its leadership position, its reward systems, its dispersion of power, or its forums for conversation and decision making; (5) affect the decision-making process in which the department is engaged; or (6) create alternative structures such as institutes or offices of first-year studies to take over some of the department's function. Because departments differ, strategies from these various categories must be shaped to the department's own characteristics. A nationwide initiative to assist departments might offer consulting to departments and institutions. The national initiative would disseminate models of best practice, train department leaders, and conduct research on departmental work and departmental change. (PW)

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Academic Departments: How They Work, How They Change

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Should Departments Change?

In the current environment of economic, political, ideological, and technological pressures on higher education, departments must attend carefully to stakeholders' demands to (a) improve undergraduate student learning, especially in general education; (b) collaborate across disciplines; (c) apply knowledge to community and workplace needs; (d) be more cost-efficient or "productive"; and (e) provide education by alternative means, using technology to transcend boundaries of time and space (Kennedy, 1997, p. 277; Layzell, 1999). But departments must not only respond to the latest societal pressures but also, in a free society, defend values, question societal norms, and freely pursue knowledge. In fulfilling their complex missions, departments must focus not only on what to do but also on what to be. Though not all departments need to change in the same ways, departments across the nation must reinvent new forms of collegiality and become more outward-oriented, more focused on results, and more entrepreneurial. They must develop new systems to reward their members, enhance productivity, and assure the quality of their work.

How Can Departments Change?

The foundation for departmental reform is Zemsky's concept that "the way to reform is not to circumvent the departmental structure that is endemic to most academic institutions but to enlist that structure in the reform itself." (1991, p. 5) Those who would change the department must deeply understand it. From that understanding emerge strategies for change. Characteristics of departments emerge from the national literature; each practitioner must use them as a heuristic to question the cultures and structures of his or her own department.

Appendix A summarizes the specific traits of departments we discuss and the avenues for changes suggested by those traits. Unlike normal businesses, which organize subunits of people around functions aligned for administrative convenience, academic departments organize people of similar disciplinary interests to serve multiple constituencies in ways that allow both innovation and predictability. At its best, the department is the flexible belt, not the fixed cog, that channels intellectual energy into administrative work.

In the department, the core academic values—among them academic freedom, autonomy, collegiality, specialization, and reason—are strong but often in conflict and under attack; change strategies must build upon and redefine these values. The department within its institution is uniquely autonomous yet uniquely interdependent. Change must build on departmental autonomy, but it also requires complex roles from central administrators—provision of shared mission, rich information, fiscal incentives, crises and deadlines, support for chairs, alternative structures that enhance or replace traditional departmental tasks, and university governance systems that encourage interdisciplinary collaboration for the common good. If the role of departments is to channel intellectual energy to serve multiple constituencies, then the role of the administration is not to fight the department or master it, but to help it do its proper work.

Departments' internal organization combines elements of the collegium and the bureaucracy as well as oligarchic, political, feudal, and caste-based systems. The collegial model, in which a closely knit group of peers under a consultative leader share work and decision making in collaborative ways, is treasured as an ideal by faculty. Some literature suggests the collegial model is the most successful form of governance in higher education. But traditional collegial forms are stressed as departments take on new roles and new types of non-tenure-track faculty or support staff, and as they conduct education in geographically dispersed or virtual spaces, collaborating in new ways with businesses and with alternative providers. Much of departmental leadership, work, roles, and rewards can be understood as a mixed, transitional response to these new challenges.

Departmental leaders, largely untrained for administration, are torn among multiple allegiances and multiple tasks, and they wield ambiguous power. They must somehow balance bureaucratic work with strategic and visionary functions to lead change. Departmental work is determined by multiple influences and by the considerable autonomy of faculty to allocate their time. As increasing numbers of non-tenure-track or geographically dispersed faculty fall outside the traditional modes of collegial interaction and shared norms, departments may lose control of quality, or

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they may implement more bureaucratic modes of control, such as job distinction by rank and title, assessment of outcomes, and extrinsic rewards. Change must build on the best of departmental experiments with new modes of ensuring quality.

Departments have traditionally enhanced productivity by hiring new (sometimes low-cost) teaching staff, by increasing class size, and by using technology for research and writing. Still largely wedded to the traditional classroom lecture and testing paradigms, faculty are faced with new paradigms of learning, new demands for education that transcends boundaries of time and space, students with new expectations, and the need for new forms of productivity—which have given rise to pedagogical movements and experiments that are still largely outside the traditional departmental systems of work and rewards. Change must build upon best practice as departments struggle toward new modes.

In short, the department still exhibits the collegial modes and academic values of its original form as a guild of scholars who banded together to sell their services. But it is exhibiting on all fronts the mixed, transitional, and experimental modes that mark its transition to a much more complex world in which it must not only keep up with rapidly changing disciplinary knowledge but also offer increasingly diversified services to an increasingly complex world. Academic departments are not dinosaurs, but evolving organisms that are experimenting with new forms and that need help and support to realize the potential for change that their structures imply.

What Types of Strategies Can Departments Use for Change?

Change strategies in the literature fall into six categories: (a) change the environment; (b) change the type of person in the department; (c) address values by building on them, changing them, or resolving conflicts among them; (d) change or build upon the way the department is structured in terms of its organization, its leadership positions, its reward systems, its dispersion of power, or its forums for conversation and decision making; (e) affect the decision-making process in which the department is engaged; or (f) create alternative structures such as institutes or offices of first-year studies to take over some of the department's functions. Because departments differ, strategies from these various categories must be shaped to the department's own characteristics. They must be combined and integrated; no strategy by itself is likely to be sufficient.

What Should Departments Be?

The most important goal is to change not only what a department does but also what it becomes. The visionary strand of the literature suggests that departments need "collegial entrepreneurialism" or "authentic collegiality" enhanced with "quality" principles. It suggests that departments try to become "learning" departments or "teams." The primary features of the new visions are (a) a department's capacity for self-knowledge, including understanding its culture, environments, assumptions, values, and mental models; (b) systems thinking, which views all elements of an organization as interacting parts; (c) open and productive interaction that encourages closeness, collaboration, minimal defensiveness, and the ability to handle conflict; (d) high freedom for individuals combined with encouragement for individuals to commit to the good of the department; (e) outward focus on interpreting the environment, meeting the needs of stakeholders, and producing results; (f) emphasis on learning from experience; and (g) support for leaders who are collaborative yet who also initiate and guide the group.

A nationwide initiative to assist departments might offer consulting to departments and institutions, helping them to initiate change and become more effective. The national initiative would also disseminate models of best practice, train department leaders, and conduct research on departmental work and departmental change.

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